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Religious Pluralism in Theological Education

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In this essay, I will try to explain and ground a conviction that I share with many colleagues in the Christian theological community: that one of the reasons why Christian theological education is not adequately doing its job of mediating between culture and religion has to do with the mono-religions *character of most Christian theology today. Theological educators are going about their job on the basis of an exclusive, or too restrictive, use of Christian tradition and experience. They have closed themselves to, or are not sufficiently open to, other religious traditions and identities.*

The problem: Locked within the House of Authority

In order to situate and explain this broad assertion, I would like to make use of Mark Kline Taylor's recent proposal for "a cultural-political theology for North American praxis." Taylor urges us to move beyond the revisionist two-source model that sees theology as a delicate balancing of tradition and experience. Rather, he describes the theological task as an effort that is expressly aware of its *cultural-political* context (both of its past and of its present situation) and that seeks to respond, with as much balance as possible, to the *postmodern trilemma.*[1] Our postmodern consciousness, at least in North America, is shaken and enlivened by three different concerns, or three different awarenesses, that *all together* demand our attention and press our conscience as we try to understand and act within the world.

First, in reaction to the "liberal" dangers of reducing or selling out the Christian witness to the whims of modernity, postmodern awareness is marked by a *sense of tradition.* We need to acknowledge and keep hold

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[1] Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), chapter 1.

of who we are. Although we do not want to be locked in our house, we cannot forget that it is our home. At the same time, our postmodern cultural-political context feels bound to acknowledge and even celebrate *pluralism*. This is the impelling awareness, articulated theologically by David Tracy, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, and George Lindbeck and philosophically by Richard Rorty and Richard Bernstein, that there is no one abiding foundation for the search for truth, no one touchstone located outside the play of relativizing forces. Yet having lost the one foundation, we are still enriched and called by the many culturally-limited perspectives. It is within this play of the many, not outside of it, that theology must find and fashion its criteria and carry on its interpretative task. Thus, while we cannot forget that tradition is our home, we do have to venture out of it to meet the many others.

But when we venture out, we find not just diversity but *domination and oppression*—needless human and ecological suffering. This third horn of the postmodern trilemma, perhaps more urgently than the others, also demands a hermeneutical response—one that will lead not just to understanding but to resistance. In view of the domination that is sapping the lives of peoples and the planet, the importance of either tradition or pluralism cannot be absolute. An interpretation of tradition that does not respond to the domination outside or within itself is felt to be effete, even immoral. The same must be said about a celebration of pluralism that takes place amid starvation, death squads, and a diminishing ozone layer. We are in a "postmodernism of resistance."

One of the principal reasons why Christian theologians are not sufficiently aware of and responsive to this postmodern trilemma is, to use the image of Edward Farley, because they have locked themselves in their own "house of authority."[2] Christian theology too naively and dangerously presumes the authority—the a priori and normative truth—of its own sources for theology, that is, of its own "experience" and its own "Christian fact" (scripture and tradition).

Liberation theologians affirm, and significantly clarify, Farley's admonition. They remind representatives of the so-called dominant theology (European-North American, white, male, middle-class) that in trying to work out a correlation between tradition and "common human experience," the experience that has counted most, or been used most, is not at all that "common." It has indeed excluded, or at least neglected, the vast majority of people who, caught in a variety of oppressive structures, have not had a voice in the assemblies of government, church, or acad-

[2] Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 125.

emy. So the voices and experience of the "wretched" of the earth (who populate not only the so-called Third World), who, because of class, gender, or race have been excluded, must also be given "authority" in the hermeneutical task of theology. Because this has not yet happened, the experiential sources for theological criteria are still locked, to a great extent, in a middle-class, First-World house of authority.

Expressing awareness of the second element in the postmodern trilemma—pluralism—others, especially those speaking out of non-western cultures (again, such cultures are present within the West!), protest that the other source of the revisionist model, tradition, has also been understood too restrictively. Tradition is caught in a house of authority not just because, as Farley explains, it is viewed too uncritically (as possessing a priori truth) but also because it is viewed too much in isolation. The claim being made here is that although Christian tradition is certainly the focal content of Christian theology, it cannot be the *only* content. Indeed, one effective way of unlocking the door of the house of authority that confines the current notion of Christian tradition is to recognize that there are other traditions that can also claim us. The Christian house is not the only house on the block! There is no better challenge to excessive authority than to recognize other authorities. This means, therefore, a better balance between tradition and pluralism.

In what follows, I would like to expand on this second claim—namely, that Christian theology can no longer be done mono-religiously, that theologians must not only recognize but embrace the reality of many "religious facts" besides the "Christian fact," and that therefore theology cannot be divorced from religious studies. I would like to show, in part 1, why a marriage between theology and religious studies is *necessary*, and then, in part 2, why such a marriage is difficult, yet possible and fruitful. I will conclude, in part 3, with some practical suggestions about how such a marriage can be "arranged" in the educational structures of seminaries and theology departments.[3]

[3] As I hope will be evident in the following pages, my use of the terms "theology" and "religious studies" does *not* signify two approaches or methods that can be identified simply as "subjective vs. objective" or "advocacy vs. scholarship." Rather, I am speaking of two different areas or contents for study, *both* of which include advocacy *and* scholarship, subjective engagement *and* objective data. Both theology and religious studies seek to mediate between religion and culture. Religious studies does so with an understanding of religion as a pluralistic phenomenon and so recognizes the possible "truth" or "validity" of many religious traditions and forms of religious experience; religious studies, therefore, does not operate with a priori criteriological preferences for any one religious tradition. Envisioning a more modest goal, theology seeks to mediate between the Christian religion and culture, convinced that this mediation can take place from within the Christian tradition *by itself*. By calling for a marriage between theology and religious studies, I am questioning this "by itself."

Theology and Religious Studies: A Necessary Marriage

A New Awareness of Other Religions

The awareness of pluralism that goes to make up what we are calling a postmodern consciousness has been brought about through a variety of factors. One of them is what can be called the *new* experience of religious pluralism. Those who would diminish the impact of this experience by arguing that it is not at all new and that Christianity from its cradle was aware of and struggled against a variety of religions are missing, I suspect, the significant differences between the two ages.[4] Certainly, the early Christians were aware of the religious panorama that colored the Roman Empire, but they saw these religious others either as a state religion that threatened to dominate their own new-born identity or as a syncretistic force that would throw their unique experience of Jesus the Christ into a religious boiling pot made up of "a little bit of everything." Given both the rampant syncretism of the time and the fragile, minority self-awareness of the Christian churches, one can understand that a conversational encounter between Christianity and other religious paths was not possible.

Today it seems that such an encounter is possible, indeed, that it is taking place. We are aware not only of the enduring *existence* of other spiritual paths (after centuries of Christian missionary efforts); we are aware not only of their richness and beauty; but many Christians are also coming to perceive what Langdon Gilkey has termed the "rough parity" of other religious ways. It is an undeniable reality that other religious paths and religious figures have played, and continue to play, as valid and engaging a role in the lives of others as Christianity has played for Christians. And it looks like this is the given, the enduring state of affairs. There are *many* religions, and if we hesitate to speak of a "rough parity" between them, at least we must recognize "equal rights" among them. This, as Gilkey himself has experienced, is "a monstrous shift indeed . . . a position quite new to the churches, even to the liberal churches . . . [a move that] has devastating theological effects." It means that "no one revelation is or can be the universal criterion for all the others. . . ."[5]

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[4] See S. Mark Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way? Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985), pp. 33–38; Carl Braaten, "Christocentric Trinitarianism vs. Unitarian Theocentrism," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 24(1987) 17–21.

[5] Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), pp. 39–30, 48.

Such an awareness of religious pluralism makes heavy demands on our traditional ways of interpreting Christian tradition. W.C. Smith's oft-quoted declaration is a challenge that has still not penetrated most programs of theological education: "We explain the fact that the Milky Way is there by the doctrine of creation, but how do we explain the fact that the *Bhagavad Gita* is there?"[6] Traditional explanations that either condemn other religions as pagan, or ignore them as irrelevant, or affirm them as stepping stones to the Gospel (*praeparatio evangelica*) just do not fit the experience and awareness that many Christians have of other believers. As David Tracy, himself wary of simplistic responses to this new awareness, has admitted: "for many of us, as the dialogues become more serious and more a part of thinking religiously and theologically, some envisonment of radical religious pluralism becomes a live option."[7]

Shift from a Foundationalist to a Conversational Model for Interpreting Tradition

But the new awareness and its demands are leading theologians and the faithful not merely to *affirm* the "rough parity" of other religions, but also to *engage* it. As part of a broader development in hermeneutical theory, the experience of religious pluralism has helped generate the conviction that the way to interpret reality in general, and one's own religious tradition in particular, must follow the path of *conversation*.[8] If the early arguments of Ernst Troeltsch for a historical consciousness and the recent case of philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Richard Bernstein for anti-foundationalism have confirmed the experience of many that indeed there are no absolute, unchanging foundations in our pursuit of the real, we have also come to realize that this does not leave us with no place to go or nothing to do, awash in a sea of relativism. Rather, deprived of our absolutes, we are invited to conversation—to affirm our own limited views and to present them to others.

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[6] W.C. Smith, *Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 132–133.

[7] David Tracy, "On Crossing the Rubicon and Finding the Halys: Religious Pluralism and Christian Theology—Some Reflections," Unpublished paper delivered at the Blaisdell Conference on Religion, Claremont, CA, March 1986, p. 22.

[8] In what follows, I cannot go into the nature and requirements of authentic conversation. If space allowed, it would be an expansion on David Tracy's summary: "Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it." *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 19. See my own guidelines for dialogue in *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 207–213.

Every interpretation of the world, every truth claim, is both "sadly" relative and, at the same time, "happily" related. Every limited, historically conditioned truth claim is related—or relatable—to other interpretations and through this relationship it can, partially but really, overcome its own limitations. The pursuit of truth, therefore, must be both "critical" (the result of our efforts to be, as Lonergan counsels, attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible) and "corporate" (the result of our conversations with others who are also seeking to be critical).[9] So our stumbling affirmations of what is true and good are not simply the result of our ideas "corresponding" to reality, nor solely of their internal coherence; rather, truth has the quality of a happening, an almost miraculous disclosure, resulting from conversing with others. Our search for truth is thus based, in the words of C.S. Peirce, on a trusting to "the multitude and variety of arguments rather than to the conclusiveness of any one."[10]

We need conversation with others not only to *affirm* our own truth, but also to be *saved from* it. Another quality of our postmodern consciousness, not mentioned above, is the awareness of the distortion or unavoidable corruption that creeps into our pursuit or affirmation of truth. With the help of masters of suspicion such as Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Foucault, especially as those suspicions have been given a feminist application, we have grown aware of the need for a "hermeneutics of suspicion"—the need constantly to be on the lookout for the worm of *ideology* that can penetrate our noblest affirmations of the true and the good. For whatever reason,[11] we bear the ever-lurking proclivity to use our truth as a means of assuring our own advantage or control over others. As Walter Benjamin has said, "Every work of civilization [we could add, every work of religion] is at the same time a work of barbarism."[12] Such ideological abuse of religion is not just a secondary "error" that can be pointed out and neatly removed. It can be, rather, a "systemic distortion."[13] And we cannot defend ourselves against such distortions by ourselves. We need conversation with others which will open us to the insights and perspectives of others who look at the world differently than we do, who can look at our visions of truth from a critical standpoint outside our circle, who perhaps can tell us how our "truth" has excluded

[9] See W.C. Smith's case for a critical and corporate consciousness, in *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 94ff.: for Lonergan's transcendental principles, see *Method in Theology* (N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1972), chapter 1.

[10] C.S. Peirce, quoted Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 224.

[11] For an extensive treatment of the inherent corruptibility of knowledge from a theological perspective, see Farley, *Fragility of Knowledge*, chapter 2.

[12] Walter Benjamin, quoted in Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 69.

[13] Ibid. p. 73.

or victimized them. To carry out a hermeneutics of suspicion, we must, then, converse with others, so they can point out our distortions, our self-centered abuse of the truth we have claimed. Combining the insights of Max Müller and Walter Benjamin, we can say "Those who know only one, turn that one into a work of barbarism."

By Itself Christian Tradition Cannot Function as Tradition

If some such conversational model is indeed part of the hermeneutical task, there will have to be a major re-structuring of theological education. More precisely, the revisionist method of theology will have to *explicitly* recognize that "tradition" as a source for the theological task cannot be understood *only* as Christian tradition. By itself, Christian tradition is both *incomplete* and *inaccessible* for the work of theology.

To recognize that Christian tradition is incomplete means that revisionist theologians cannot simply place other religions within the category of "common human experience" which is to be brought into correlation with "God's Word." In the conversational approach to truth, based on our new awareness of pluralism, we recognize that the Christian truth which we have discovered, or which has been given to us by God, can be neither "the whole truth" nor "nothing but the truth." Our conversational awareness of other religions enables us to repossess the traditional Christian assertion that God is a power of universal and self-communicating love and that therefore there is a universal revelatory presence of God within all creation. If Christian belief includes an affirmation of a "universal revelation," as even the later Karl Barth seems to have admitted; and if we claim that God has indeed "spoken in sundry forms" to all our brothers and sisters (Heb. 1: 1); then what has been made known to others must be respected and have meaning for us too.

If we believe that God has spoken to others, we must enter into a conversation with that Word. To affirm Christian tradition as the sole source or norm for theology is to disrespect what God has revealed elsewhere. The Christian Word is incomplete without other Words. Or in more contemporary terms, if it is the nature of any classic, including religious classics, to speak "publicly" and not just to members of its parent culture or religion, then this applies to all religious classics. If Christians would hold that the Bible can also, in some analogous form, be a classic for Hindus, they must also recognize that the *Upanishads* can be classics for them.

In a conversational hermeneutic, furthermore, Christian tradition, by itself, is inaccessible. Again in terms of the revisionist model, this means that theologians must expand their procedure for establishing the "appropriateness" of a theological interpretation. As Francis Fiorenza

argues, Christian theologians can no longer draw the criteria for establishing "the appropriateness of Christian claims by making use only of the earliest Christian witness (Ogden) or traditional Christian classics (Tracy)." This is so not simply for the general reason that we can understand ourselves and the meaning of our own "kerygma" only in conversation with others and their kerygma. As Fiorenza points out, it is also because the meaning of a text can be grasped not only through an "explanation" and "understanding" of the text but also within the sociohistorical life-practice that produced it and resulted *and results* from it. "This emphasis on the life-praxis that produces texts and the life-praxis that flows from texts raises the issue of the relationship between diverse life-practices and the meaning and truth of religious classics." Such life-practices involve others, especially other believers. Thus, we cannot understand the meaning and truth of our religious classics unless we also analyze and evaluate the life-practices that they produce—including those practices that affect, positively and negatively, other religious communities and their classics. And we will be able truly to comprehend such practices only if we hear directly from those religious communities. This means that only in a conversation with other religious communities, not only about the meaning of their classics but also about the way in which the life-practices produced by our classics have affected—perhaps excluded or subordinated or marginalized—them can we move forward to an appropriate interpretation of the meaning of our classics and tradition.[14]

Under pressure from this new awareness of the validity of other religious paths and the necessity to converse with them, we have recently heard rousing, daunting calls for a marriage between theology and the study of other religions. Paul Tillich was one of the first to voice the invitation when, in the last lecture of his life, he expressed his desire to rewrite his *Systematic Theology* "oriented toward, and in dialogue with, the whole history of religions."[15] Wilfred Cantwell Smith has gone even further and disturbed many comfortable theology professors with his call for a "world theology." "The true historian [of religions] and the true theologian are one and the same . . . To speak truly about God means henceforth to interpret accurately the history of human religious life on earth. . . . The new foundation for theology must become the history of religion."[16]

[14] Francis Schlüssler Fiorenza, "Theology and Religious Studies: The Contest of the Faculties," in *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, Edward Farley and Barbara Wheeler, eds. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 132–133.

[15] *The Future of Religions*, Jerald C. Brauer, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 31, 91.

[16] Smith, "Theology and the World's Religious History," in *Toward a Universal Theol-*

With such a world theology, Smith means more than the already unsettling claim made by John Cobb that Christianity can and must reinterpret and even "transform" itself through conversations with other traditions.[17] Smith envisions a Christian theology so transformed that it would have a certain universal validity: "No statement about Christian faith is valid to which in principle a non-Christian could not agree." A global theology—that is, one married to religious studies—"should be acceptable to, even cogent for, all humankind."[18] Raimundo Panikkar seems to agree when, in his Indian context, he envisions "a genuinely valid theology for both Hindu and Christian."[19]

One has the distinctly uneasy feeling that with such proposals and visions, one might be rushing into the marriage of theology and religious studies much too quickly, or expecting too much of it.

Theology and Religious Studies: A Difficult Marriage

Spouses or Just Friends?

Any new romance between theology and religious studies must be "interrupted" by warnings from anti-foundationalist philosophers and hard-nosed cultural anthropologists. If one takes these warnings seriously, one finds almost as many reasons for the *impossibility* of a healthy marriage between theology and religious studies as one may find or its *necessity*. Like many modern marriages that claim to be based on equality but in reality are still caught in patriarchal structures, many theologians who endorse pluralism and a new relationship between Christian theology and religious studies actually end up with a relationship of subordination. The criticism that Fiorenza levels against Schubert Ogden, David Tracy, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Bernard Lonergan has been posed, *a fortiori*, to the more thorough-going pluralists such as John Hick, W.C. Smith, and myself: "Unconsciously, they make Christian or Western conceptions of theology and religion covertly normative for what constitutes religious studies."[20] In one way or another—either via a singular *Theos* or

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ogy of Religion, Leonard Swidler, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 55; see also Smith's "The World Church and the World History of Religion: The Theological Issue," in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 39 (1984) 52–68.

[17] Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

[18] *Towards a World Theology*, pp. 101, 126

[19] Raimundo Panikkar, "*Rtatattva*: A Preface to a Hindu-Christian Theology," *Jeevadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretations*, 49 (1979) 13.

[20] Fiorenza, "Theology and Religious Studies," pp. 130–131. For criticisms of Hick,

Ultimate Reality, or a universal faith or basic trust, or a falling in love unrestrictedly, or an openness to the future—such pluralists presuppose some kind of common ground on which they live out the marriage of theology and religious studies—that is, by which they understand and adjudicate all religious reality. The common ground, of course, is found in their own backyard. Thus well-intentioned pluralists become anonymous imperialists. It is one thing to affirm the lack of absolute foundations; it is quite another to live and act without them.

There are those who say it is impossible to live without such foundations. I am not speaking of fundamentalist believers for whom there is one, unchanging truth in light of which all other claims are either valueless or evil, to be tolerated or obliterated. I refer, rather, to a response to pluralism that has called itself "postliberal." Recognizing the reality of pluralism and perhaps even the "rough parity" of other religions, these theologians are equally sobered by the anti-foundationalist claims and the consequent specter of incommensurability between religious perspectives. For them, there is no common experience or common goal or common anything within the world of religions; rather, religions are different "cultural-linguistic" systems that determine whatever experience may be had within the different traditions. To think, as people such as Hick or Smith or I seem to, that we can transcend these cultural-linguistic traditions and understand and even pass judgment on others is to begin the descent down the slippery slope of imperialism.

Rather than rush into a marriage between theology and religious studies, postliberals propose a kind of "good neighbor policy" by which they mean that Christians should resist any appeals to understand themselves and their tradition through conversations with others and should realize that their identity is to be established within their own house or system; and yet, Christians are not to ignore their neighbors, as if they and their neighbors did not have anything to say to each other. Though there is no intrinsic need to converse with others—and no given foundations to do so—Christians are to give witness to what they believe and to the ways in which they address the life-threatening issues of our age. How that witness is received, how its reception affects others or Christians themselves are not for them to know in advance. William Placher has called such postliberal realism an "unapologetic theology" according to which he maintains ". . . that Christians ought to speak in their own voice and not worry about finding philosophical 'foundations' for their

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Smith, Knitter see Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, pp. 43–47; Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), chapter 1; S. Mark Heim, "Thinking about Theocentric Christology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24 (1987) 1–16; William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 144–146, 152.

claims. . . . Christians must remain faithful to their own vision of things for reasons internal to Christian faith, and if, in some contexts, that means intellectual isolation, so be it."[21]

There is no doubt about the validity and importance of postliberal concerns that a marriage between theology and religious studies, required by a conversational model of truth, can easily lead either to a loss of Christian identity or to an exploitation of other religions. Yet the postliberal option in favor of what I have called a good-neighbor policy seems exposed to serious dangers as well. As others have pointed out,[22] it can lead to a new form of fideism by which one has no grounds to criticize one's own cultural-linguistic system, or to a type of isolationism in which one is protected from criticisms and suspicions of others, or to a political toothlessness brought about by the lack of any basis on which to resist in a valid and coherent way what appear to be intolerable in other cultural-linguistic systems. More fundamentally, the postliberal position seems to rule out any possibility of testing or verifying whether the conversational model of truth might just be correct. Maybe the marriage between theology and religious studies, difficult though it be, can work and bear abundant fruit.

Working At It

Like many young (or old!) couples trembling before the apparent impossibility of a healthy, happy marriage but nonetheless believing or trusting that it can work, so, too, do many philosophers, anthropologists, historians, and theologians confront the complexity and dangers of a genuine conversation with another culture or period or religion. Such conversations, they feel, are among those forced options that cannot be ignored without incurring even greater danger. Well aware of the incommensurable gaps between cultures and religions, and well aware that one always views another cultural-linguistic system through one's own, many people are convinced that if they are to save and transform the world, they must interpret it and that such interpretation calls for conversation and joint efforts. Therefore, they find themselves responding

[21] Placher, p. 13. Elsewhere Placher states: "For the recently emerged *postliberal* theology, the theologian's task is more nearly simply to describe the Christian view of things. Postliberal theologians note ad hoc conjunctions and analogies with the questions and beliefs of non-Christians, but their primary concern is to preserve the Christian vision free of distortion . . ." p. 154. See esp. Placher's chapters 7, 9–10. Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* remains the best known statement of postliberal theology For another statement, see William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," *Journal of Religion*, 66(1986) 282–301.

[22] See for instance James M. Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church, and the University," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society*, 40(1985) 83–94.

with a "basic trust"—or better, a Kierkegaardian leap of faith—that interpretation through conversation *is* possible and that it *can* bear fruit.

Our experience somehow tells us that although they may be complex and dangerous, conversations, like marriages, do work. Incommensurable gaps between cultures and religions, although painful, should not be made into absolutes any more than particular religion claims should be absolutized. "We cannot find an Archimedian point, a universal standard of rationality. On the other hand, we are not utterly imprisoned within our current horizons."[23] In other words, like any real conversation or marriage, a relationship between theology and religious studies can work—but only by being worked at, carefully, daily. What follows are some guidelines as to how that might be done.

As David Tracy has made clear, conversation cannot take place unless there is genuine questioning on both sides.[24] If I have no real questions, if I feel I have all the answers or that any new answers must agree with mine (because I have the "final word"), attempts at conversation are blocked before they can take a step. Besides questioning, there must also be asserting. While conversation may be blocked if I feel I have all the answers, it may be stymied if I feel I have none. This dipolarity between questioning and asserting requires the theologian seeking to converse with other believers a balancing between particularity and universality. From Christian particularity or uniqueness, one can make specific claims about truth and the way the world can be transformed; from a recognition of the universality of truth or God, one is ever open to new questions (and, of course, new answers). Harvey Cox may be right that the "crisis in the current state of interfaith dialogue can be stated simply: the universal and the particular poles have come unhinged."[25] A condition for the possibility of a marriage or genuine conversation between theology and religious studies is that Christians revise their way of balancing particularity and universality.

To claim that in order to make dialogue possible Christians must discard the particularity or uniqueness of Christ as an untrue or misleading myth will, of course, get the dialogue nowhere, and it will offend and anger many Christians. And yet, at the same time, one must recognize that traditional understandings of Christ's uniqueness as "definitive," "unsurpassable," "final" strangle the ability to ask genuinely new questions and hear new answers. Unique or particular claims—such as "no other name, only-begotten Son, one Mediator"—are, like all symbolic-mythic language, in need of careful interpretation and revision. One way

[23] Placher, p. 112.

[24] *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp. 18–21.

[25] Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 3.

of interpreting "the uniqueness of Christianity" that would be true to the praxis-oriented meaning of traditional Christological language and conducive to conversation with others would be to understand claims of uniqueness to mean not that the particular truth made known in Jesus is definitively normative for all others or necessarily superior to (or unsurpassable by) them, but that such claims are *decisive* for Christians and of *universal* and *indispensable* significance for others. The uniqueness of Christ in regard to other traditions, therefore, means *universality* not *finality;* the Christian Word is vitally meaningful for all peoples of all times, and not to have heard this Word is to have missed a "saving" vision of truth; but it does not mean that this Word is the normative fulfillment of all other Words.[26] Indeed, such an understanding of Christ's uniqueness recognizes a possibly analogous uniqueness (universal and indispensable for all peoples) in the "revelations" (admittedly, a Christian term) contained in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, African religions, etc. There would then be a possible complementary uniqueness among religious figures and traditions. I believe it can be shown that such a revision of uniqueness is consistent with the New Testament witness.[27]

But having disabused ourselves of pre-established absolutes or foundational norms, how do we enter into and carry on the conversation? How do we hear new questions and open ourselves to new answers? How do we state our case so that others can understand? How can we not simply understand each other but also judge each other? Here we face, again, the delicate and thorny question of the need for some kind of common ground for the task of mutual understanding and judging. In order to respond to this need without slipping into imperialism, we must keep in mind that such common ground must be established *mutually*; it must be discovered or created within the conversation itself by all the partners, not beforehand by any one partner. Also, if we do find such common ground that will enable us to speak, listen and act together, we must also bear in mind that it will be the kind of terrain on which we can build not concrete structures, but only tents. As Taylor has stated, it will be "shaky" common ground which will shift and reform as the conversation stumbles on.[28]

Another guideline in stumbling on and trying to create the common ground of understanding is to proceed with something like an analogical imagination. In trying to converse with another believer in a face-to-face

[26] Edward Schillebeeckx comes to such an understanding of uniqueness and thus revises previous positions in his christology in "The Religious and the Human Ecumene," in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustave Gutiérrez*, Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 182–186.

[27] See Knitter, *No Other Name?* pp. 173–186; also, id., "Dialogue and Liberation: Foundations for a Pluralist Theology of Religions," *The Drew Gateway*, 58 (1988) 33–48.

[28] Taylor, "In Praise of Shaky Ground: the Liminal Christ and Cultural Pluralism," *Theology Today*, 43 (1986) 36–51.

encounter, or in trying to interpret another religious classic in the classroom, we first affirm and then allow the otherness of the other to confront us and make itself known. This will require an embracing of the otherness through some form of "passing over" to and entering into the world of that other. This process engages our intellect but is energized and directed especially by the imagination. We allow the images of the other's world to lead us where they will and to stir our own imaginations to see and feel things differently, and so to come to insights into reality that we may never have entertained before. We then seek to test these insights by applying them to our previous understandings and ways of being in the world. In such an effort to pass over via the analogical imagination there is required a letting go, a trustful following of the images and insights, a conversation that, like a game, ends up playing us more than we play it. And in this effort, we experience the analogical nature of the process when we discover that after having affirmed and felt the other to be genuinely *different*, we realize that what is different can become for us a genuine and new *possibility* of understanding and living. Analogy wins out over incommensurability. The incommensurable becomes the possible. Conversation has taken place and borne fruit.[29]

In this process of creating common ground through the analogical imagination, there is a mystical ingredient. But it is *not* the battered claim of a common mystical core within all the religions of the world which can be discovered when mystics of different traditions slough off their externals of doctrine and ritual and enter, nakedly and silently, into the one Still Point within all tradition. The process of passing over makes no claims about a "common essence" or "core-religious experience" for all religions. But it does, at least implicitly, require all participants in the inter-religious conversation to take the mystical step of *letting go* of previous concepts and patterns and of embracing the other in the *trust*, even the expectant hope, that there may be something that makes it possible, worthwhile and necessary to embrace the other and to realize, with the other, the common ground that makes possible mutual understanding. We find ourselves trusting that there may be such common ground and that we can, together, grow in mutual understanding and efforts to transform this world. Without such trust, the conversation would never be taken up. But in such trust, we are not trusting a predefined "one God" or "Ultimate Reality." Genuinely mystical, it is more a trust in a "known Unknown."[30]

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[29] For a description of this process see Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp. 18–21, 90–93. John Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1972), pp. ix, 53.

[30] Raimundo Panikkar holds that interreligious dialogue cannot be based on any theories of a world theology or common essence, but that what is needed is a "cosmic trust" in the process itself. See his "The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic

The Hermeneutical Link: Pluralism and Oppression

But more must be said about how theology and religious studies can carry on their relationship and conversation. In our world, especially as experienced in a post-modern consciousness, there *is* a *starting point* or a *context* for creating the common ground of understanding and criticism between religions. It is a context that both obligates and facilitates the interreligious conversation. I am speaking of a necessary link between the elements of *pluralism* and *oppression* in the "postmodern trilemma."

Some postliberal theologians suggest that the conversation between Christians and others might use an "ad hoc apologetics." "All that we ever have is the common ground that *happens to exist* [emphasis mine] among different particular traditions. . . . By 'ad hoc apologetics'. . . . [is meant] that we should let the common ground we share with a given conversation partner set the starting point for the particular conversation, not looking for any *universal* rules or assumptions for human conversation generally."[31] Such advice makes sense but is vastly understated. There is a general, universal "ad hoc" situation that can provide the starting point for establishing the common ground of religious discourse and the "raw material," as it were, for the analogical imagination. This common ground is the specter of pervasive domination and oppression—that is, human and ecological suffering brought about by human choices.

Pluralism and oppression, then, are not just two realities weighing equally upon our postmodern consciousness; they are interrelated in the responses that they elicit from us. This interrelatedness can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. First, the oppression that may afflict the participants in interreligious discourse must become part of the discourse itself. In order genuinely to converse with the other, it is not sufficient to recognize his or her *difference*. Before we can recognize and affirm their difference, we must first affirm, or make possible his or her *freedom*. How can I respect and hear from someone else's otherness if that otherness is not permitted to be what it seeks to be or cannot express itself as it will? Therefore, it would seem that a condition for the possibility of conversation with an other whose identity is dominated by structures of socio-economic or racial or gender oppression is first to *resist* actively and act to overcome that domination. "Celebrating difference" and "resisting domination," therefore, become dipolar phases of the same act of discourse. As Taylor has observed, "This brings the struggle for liberation

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Confidence in Reality," in *Toward a World Theology of Religions* (see note 16), pp. 118–153.

[31] Placher, pp. 167–168. See Hans Frei, "Eberhard Busch's Biography of Karl Barth," in *Karl Barth in Re-View*, H. Martin Rumscheidt, ed. (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), p. 114; William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics" (note 21).

and justice and the struggle for knowledge amid relativity much closer to one another than we often think."[32]

But the conversation must include resistance not only to the oppression of the participants themselves, but also, and especially, to that of others outside the immediate conversation. Participants in religious conversations must listen to the anguished voices of oppressed groups in their immediate environment, their nation, and the community of nations, and of the oppressed earth. Certainly, not all these issues can be embraced in every conversation; but neither can the interreligious dialogue take place without in some way responding to the "ad hoc" reality of oppression and suffering that racks our world. If there is any context in which the airy expression "common human experience" might be concretized, it is in these frightening faces of ecological devastation, death-dealing poverty and starvation, and threatened nuclear holocaust that confront all human beings cross-culturally and cross-religiously.

One must be careful of speaking of the ethical imperative to confront such issues, since morality is so culture-bound. And yet, it does seem evident that present-day followers of almost all religious paths—from eastern to western to so-called primal spiritualities—are recognizing that their own spiritual traditions require them to respond to the reality of human and planetary oppression. (Perhaps Marx was right in describing religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature.") Various, vastly different, "theologies of liberation" are emerging among religious communities throughout the world. If Tracy is right in describing religions as "exercises in resistance" and as revealing "various possibilities for human freedom . . . whether seen as Utopian visions or believed in as revelations of Ultimate Reality . . ."[33]; and if, as I have argued elsewhere, within all religious traditions there seems to be a "soteriocentric core" of concern for human well-being in this world[34]; then a commitment to "liberation from" or "resistance to" the myriad forms of oppression that bind our world must function as a starting point (certainly not the only one) or as the "ad hoc context" for creating common ground of understanding and mutual cooperation.

We can expect that the shared praxis of resistance to domination, recognized as a shared ethical imperative, can become a "hermeneutical link" by which religions are able to bridge the chasm of incommensurability. Certainly each religion will have its different forms of praxis, based

[32] Mark Kline Taylor, "Religion, Cultural Pluralism, and Liberating Praxis: In Conversation with the Works of Langdon Gilkey," *Journal of Religion*, 71(1991) p. 164, see also pp. 158–159.

[33] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 84.

[34] Knitter, "Dialogue and Liberation," (note 27), pp. 26–32. Also, id., "Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (see note 5), pp. 178–202.

on its different analysis of the cause of oppression; but in sharing and acting together out of these various forms of praxis, religious believers will open new possibilities of reflective sharing. Interreligious dialogue and the wedding of theology and religious studies will be infused by a shared praxis of trying to overcome domination and suffering. As the Christian base communities of Latin America have been enriched by grounding their interpretation of Christian tradition on a praxis of justice, so might communities of interreligious discourse and study be enriched by basing their efforts to interpret each other on a shared praxis of resistance to oppression.[35]

Some Practical Suggestions

If there is any validity to this call for a truly pluralistic model for theological education, then it will require significant changes in theological programs of seminaries and universities. Such practical restructuring can, of course, best be worked out *in situ*, according to varying contexts. What follows are a few practical, though still general, suggestions.

Clearly, as has often been noted, the restructuring of theological education requires much more than tinkering with the curriculum; yet my first suggestion has to do with curricular changes. If the conversation with other traditions must enter into the theological process in some significant degree, there will have to be greater opportunity for taking up that conversation than are presently available in most seminaries and graduate programs. Simply put, theological students need opportunities to learn about traditions that, given their traditional western, Christian background, are, for the most part, foreign to them. This will call for required courses in traditions others than Christianity; and such courses will have to form an integral part of the educational program.

Such courses require a special and demanding methodology. As stated earlier in this essay, they must meld both scholarship and advocacy

[35] I have tried to say more about how such a hermeneutical link functions in interreligious discourse in "Dialogue and Liberation," pp. 22–26. See also John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 21–69. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza summarizes the challenge and promise of liberative praxis as a hermeneutical link between diverse religious communities: "In facing shared political oppression, economic domination, race and gender exploitation as well as death, isolation, and loneliness, we encounter issues that retroductively make possible areas of communicative discourse and even agreement. These common issues, even though viewed quite diversely, require a dialogue so that in facing them we also overcome elements of incommensurability that prohibit dialogue. What I am suggesting is precisely where humanity is threatened, there exist the challenge of diverse religious beliefs and practice to bring resources of their religious traditions to bear on these threats to humanity. In confronting these challenges, possibilities for religious self-transcendence and for conversation exist." See, "Theology and Religious Studies," p. 136 (note 14).

and so enable students not only to understand but also to be challenged by other religious ways of being in the world. It would be ironic to teach other religions in a theology program with a method that is increasingly recognized as outmoded within "religious studies" programs. Even teachers of the history of religions in secular universities are admitting that to present the contents of religious traditions in a detached (*epoché*), objective, and non-judgmental way is both impossible and, for most students, a waste of time. Religions make claims about reality, and we do not respect those claims unless we ask questions not only of their meaning but of their truth.[36] So must religions be taught in theological curricula—in a conversational, rather than in a purely informational mode, and in an attempt to mediate between the religions and contemporary culture.

This, of course, is more easily said than done. If such courses must avoid a purely detached approach, they must also steer clear of the other extreme, more common in seminaries, of forming Christian judgments before one has been attentive to and informed of what the religions are saying. Such an approach is usually predetermined to view the religions as either inferior to or as a preparation for Christ and Christianity. The multi-religious model we are calling for must enable conversation, not monologue.

But such conversation requires more than the careful, sensitive, involved study of another religious tradition; it also calls for a personal entrance into the other's world of experience. Earlier in this essay, I referred to this as a process of "passing over" via the "analogical imagination." To carry out this process, theology courses on other traditions will have to provide their students with opportunities genuinely to feel and to experiment with the truth of other ways. In a sense, students are to be encouraged, provisionally and always in a limited sense, *to be* Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim. How this can be done will depend on the ingenuity and boldness of the teacher. Passing over to another religious world can be facilitated, for instance, through some form of actual conversation with followers of other faiths, whether this takes place in the classroom or coffee shop. Christian theological students can be greatly helped by the I-Thou experience of existentially hearing the personal witness and feeling the committed praxis of someone who is following a different way of being religious. Besides such personal encounters, passing over to another religious world can also be fostered through "trying out"—or at least observing—the spiritual practices of other religions. This can best take place in zendos or ashrams or temples where students are enabled to participate in forms of meditation, or chanting, or the puja sacrifice, or

[36] See Farley, *Fragility of Knowledge*, chapter 4.

daily prayers. Religions must be studied as lived realities, not only as cherished teachings.

Another way of passing over to other religious ways of being in the world can be realized though the praxis-oriented methodology suggested earlier. After a basic introductory course in the history of religions (popularly "comparative religions"), further courses, rather than simply dealing with more specific areas (e.g., the "history of Zen" or "Islamic mysticism"), could be issue-oriented. They could combine the ingredients of pluralism and oppression and use areas of needed liberation as the starting points or shared context for establishing the common ground of genuine conversation. Courses on "Religions and Peace" or "Buddhism, Christianity, and Ecology," or "Feminist Voices in Muslim-Christian Dialogue" would be both more engaging of student interest and would provide a more effective "hermeneutical link" for both entering into and being challenged by other religious worlds.

Merely to add high-quality theologically-oriented courses on other religions to the curriculum will not, in itself, achieve the intended goal of a multi-religious restructuring of theological education. If the conversation with other religions cannot, understandably, be the exclusive or dominant concern in theological reflection, neither can it be shunted off to the side track of a few required courses. What is needed and hoped for is that a conversation with other traditions may, to some extent, be made an integral part of all courses in a Christian curriculum, especially those courses traditionally identified as systematic or ethical. Thus, in teaching a standard course on evil or redemption or church or the question of God, teachers will inject into the discussions what other religious perspectives hold, how they may radically differ, how they may provoke Christian tradition to further reflection. Naturally, given the expertise and general background of most theological faculties, such dreams of mainlining an interreligious conversation into the general curriculum cannot be realized overnight. But they will never be realized at all unless the ideal is affirmed.

Although we cannot realistically expect either students or professors to be proficient in all the major religious traditions of the world, we can entertain more modest, yet helpful, expectations. What can be expected—eventually of teachers, more immediately of students—is that every Christian theologian have, as it were, a minor in one religious tradition other than Christianity. After taking a broad, introductory course in "comparative religions," students of Christian theology should be encouraged or required to sub-specialize in the history, beliefs, and spirituality of some non-Christian religious path. The goal would be for students to become so "at home" in this other religious tradition that it would become a conversation partner for them as they go about their

study of Christian theology. Thus a student who has sub-specialized in Buddhism would not be able to interpret and evaluate Christian beliefs such as the trinity or the incarnation, or Christian practices such as baptism or eucharist, without hearing or feeling what a Buddhist might say to such a belief or practice, or what might be its Buddhist equivalent. Such a conversation partner can enhance, challenge, perhaps even invigorate the study of Christian theology.

In order to move toward this goal of providing conversational courses in other traditions and of including other religious perspectives in mainline courses, changes in the composition of a theological faculty are also required. No seminary or university faculty should feel itself complete or properly balanced unless it includes one or more faculty members specifically trained in one or another non-Christian tradition. Ideally, this would require someone who knows the language of the sacred texts and who has been steeped in the parent culture of the religion. Such persons should be able to represent the other tradition not only academically but personally, not only with scholarly expertise but also with existential commitment. To have such a person or persons available for advice to the entire faculty, present at faculty meetings, in chapel, in the lounge, and at Christmas parties would contribute mightily to overcoming the mono-religious mentality of most theology programs and to integrating an awareness of other religious perspectives into the school's courses and activities.

For the above practical suggestions to be properly assessed and eventually implemented, faculties and administration of seminaries, divinity schools, and theology departments will first have to undergo a fundamental attitudinal shift (a conversion!). They will have to recognize intellectually and feel existentially that the theological enterprise must move from a mono-religious to a multi-religious structure. On such a conversion depends the future health of theological education—and of Christianity.